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Some Plants POISONOUS *to Touch*

W. C. MUENSCHER

In Brief

Fifteen kinds of plants are reported to cause dermatitis in New York State. The general symptoms of inflammation, irritation, and blistering usually caused by contact with many of these plants are often confused with those caused by poison ivy and poison sumac. Recognition of the fact that these plants are poisonous and avoiding contact with them may prevent many cases of painful skin poisoning.

Twenty-five other kinds of plants are listed as possible causes of dermatitis. The frequency of poisoning from these plants is low because most individuals are not susceptible to poisoning from them or because of the infrequency of contact.

A liberal lathering with laundry soap, before going where contact with poisonous plants is unavoidable, or, as soon as possible after contact, will prevent many a serious case of dermatitis. In serious cases a physician should be consulted for treatment.

The plant on the cover illustration is poison ivy

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Some Plants POISONOUS *To Touch*

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POISONOUS PLANTS may be classified into two groups: those that are harmful when eaten and those that cause poisoning by contact. In New York State few persons are poisoned from eating plants. On the other hand, poisoning from contact with plants is rather common. Plants that cause a skin poisoning by contact are said to produce a dermatitis.

Most of the many cases of contact poisoning, or dermatitis, in New York every year are caused by poison ivy and poison sumac. It is not generally known that a dermatitis may also be produced by several other common plants. Many of these cases of dermatitis have been attributed to poison ivy and have been treated, with remedies intended for poison ivy, without success and at times to the discomfort of the patient.

This leaflet includes brief statements concerning several native and introduced species of plants that cause some dermatitis each year.

Not all persons are susceptible to poisoning from these plants. Also, a limited number of individuals may be sensitive to other plants that are not at all injurious to most persons.

Poison Ivy and Poison Sumac

These two pests, poison ivy *(Rhus Toxicodendron)* and poison sumac *(Rhus Vernix)*, are widely distributed in New York State. They cause more dermatitis than all other plants. Descriptions and preventive treatments, as well as suggestions for their control and eradication, are outlined in detail in Cornell Extension Bulletin 191. This bulletin may be obtained from the Mailing Room, Roberts Hall, New York State College of Agriculture, Ithaca, New York.

Parsnip

The wild form of the common garden parsnip *(Pastinaca sativa)* is the cause of many cases of skin poisoning. The symptoms are similar in general appearance to those caused by poison ivy. Poisoning usually results when bathers, with their skin still wet, come in contact with the parsnip leaves near the beach. Occasionally, workers are poisoned from contact with wet parsnip leaves in gardens or fields. The parsnip grows wild in waste places and old fields throughout most of New York. Its seeds are scattered by water along the banks of streams, on

Figure 1. Poison Sumac *(Rhus Vernix L)*

A branch showing leaves and drooping clusters of berry-like fruits which may persist all winter.

flooded fields, and along the shores of lakes.

Lady-slippers

Several species of lady-slippers, possibly all, cause a dermatitis, usually as a result of contact with their wet leaves or stems. The inflammation and blisters appear mostly on the hands, arms, and face, rarely on parts of the body that have not come in direct contact with the plant. The species that are most widespread in the woodlands and swamps of New York include showy lady-slipper *(Cypripedium reginae)*, yellow lady-slipper *(Cypripedium parviflorum)*, and stemless lady-slipper *(Cypripedium acaule)*. All of these native orchids have beautiful and conspicious flowers. If it were generally known that they may cause a severe dermatitis, they might be left undisturbed and in less danger of extermination.

Spurges

The genus Euphorbia contains a number of species any of which may produce a dermatitis from contact with the milky sap from their leaves or stems. The following species all have been introduced into New York as ornamentals and are still grown as such in some places. They have escaped and, in some sections, are troublesome weeds. Snow-on-the-mountain *(Euphorbia marginata)*, with its variegated or white-margined leaves, is commonly planted in the annual border or about gas stations. It causes more cases of dermatitis than do the other Euphorbias. Cypress spurge *(Euphorbia cyparissias)* and leafy spurge *(Euphorbia Esula)* are two persistent perennial weeds. Most cases of dermatitis from these weeds are caused from contact when they are pulled or mowed. Sun spurge *(Euphorbia Helioscopia)* and petty spurge *(Euphorbia peplus)* are annual weeds that persist long after the first killing frosts of autumn.

Buttercups

The sap of the leaves and stems of some of the common buttercups produces blisters and sores when handled. The cursed crowfoot *(Ranunculus sceleratus)*, tall field-buttercup *(Ranuculus acris)*, and bulbous buttercup *(Ranunculus bulbosus)* are common and widespread weeds in New York.

Iris

The rootstocks of the native wild iris, or blue flag *(Iris versicolor)*, as well as the garden irises, produce a severe dermatitis in some individuals. Although only a few persons seem to be susceptible to poisoning, some cannot handle the rootstocks without developing a dermatitis.

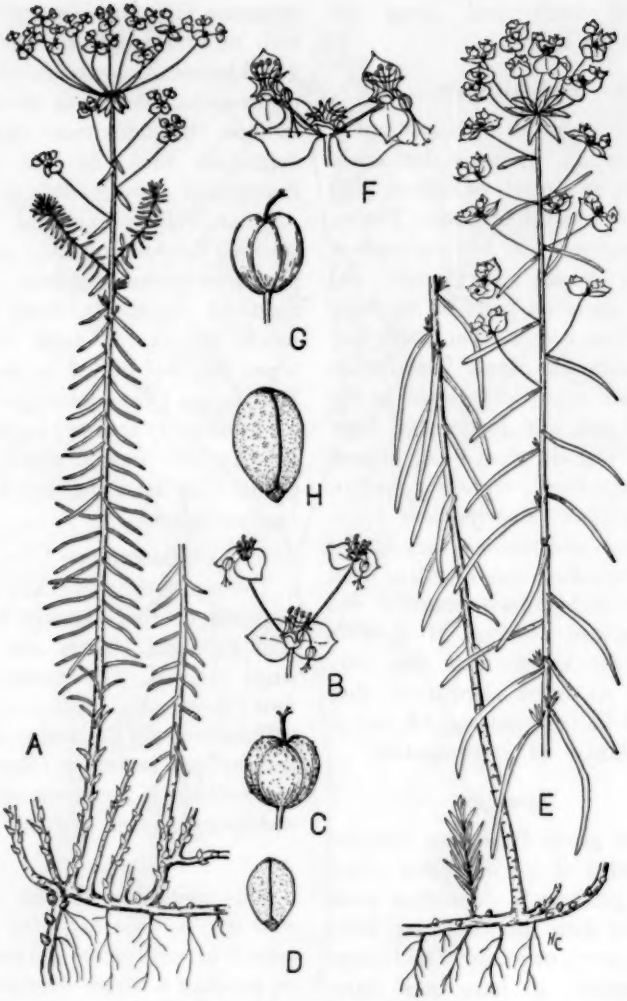

Figure 2. (A to D) Cypress Spurge *(Euphorbia Cyparissias)* and (E to H) Leafy Spurge *Euphorbia Esula)*

A, plant showing habit; × 1/3. B, portion of a flower-cluster; × 1. capsule; ×3. D, seed; ×6

E, plant showing habit; × 1/3. F, portion of a flower-cluster; × 1. G, capsule; × 3. H, seed; × 6

Figure 3. (A) Stinging Nettle *(Urtica dioica)* and (B) Wood Nettle *Laportea canadensis)*

Nettles

The stinging nettles *(Urtica* spp.) and wood nettle *(Laportea canadensis)* have stiff brittle hairs. Upon contact with the skin they break and exude a liquid which produces an intense itching or irritation, mostly of temporary duration.

Additional plants that occasionally cause dermatitis in New York State

Cultivated Plants

Common name	Scientific name	Parts causing most trouble
Gas plant	*Dictamnus albus*	Leaves, seed pods
Hop	*Humulus Lupulus*	Leaves, flowers
Lily-of-the-valley	*Convallaria majalis*	Leaves, rootstocks
Maidenhair tree	*Ginkgo biloba*	Fruits
Oleander	*Nerium Oleander*	Leaves
Osage orange	*Maclura pomifera*	Milky juice
Primrose	*Primula obconica*	Leaves
Rue	*Ruta graveolens*	Leaves, flowers
Tree-of-heaven	*Ailanthus altissima*	Leaves, flowers
Trumpet-creeper	*Campsis radicans*	Flowers

Wild Plants

Common name	Scientific name	Parts causing most trouble
Bloodroot	*Sanguinaria canadensis*	Rootstocks
Celandine	*Chelidonium majus*	Juice
Cow parsnip	*Heracleum lanatum*	Leaves
Corn chamomile	*Anthemis arvensis*	Leaves
Great burdock	*Arctium Lappa*	Leaves
Jack-in-the-pulpit	*Arisaema triphyllum*	Leaves, corms
Jimson weed	*Datura Stramonium*	Leaves, flowers
Lobelia	*Lobelia inflata*	Leaves
May-apple	*Podophyllum peltatum*	Rootstocks
Motherwort	*Leonurus Cardiaca*	Leaves, flowers
Scarlet pimpernel	*Anagallis arvensis*	Leaves
Sheep sorrel	*Rumex acetosella*	Leaves
Smartweed	*Polygonum Hydropiper*	Leaves
Vipers bugloss	*Echium vulgare*	Stem, leaves
Virgins bower	*Clematis virginiana*	Leaves

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